THE EDWARDIAN SOCIETY NOVEL

BY

HARRIS WARD WILSON

B.S. in Education, University of Missouri, 1941
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One major feature of English social change from 1860 to 1920 was the final disintegration of the old landed aristocracy. Yet surprisingly enough that decline has gone largely unrecorded in standard historical studies of the period. Historians have been preoccupied with the slow but steady advance throughout the nineteenth century of democratic concepts and legislation. And it is a tribute to the force of the democratic ideal, perhaps, that by far the great majority of social commentators hail the leveling process so accelerated in the last of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth centuries as entirely salutary; only a relative few of the less articulate mourn the passing of the old order.

But there remains, fortunately, a source in which may be found in rich detail a record of the transformation which took place in the British upper class between Gladstone's first ministry in 1868 and the advent of the Labor Government in 1923. The English domestic novel in general by its very nature — its devotion to the realistic portrayal of manners — reflects accurately, on the whole, the social area with which it deals. This holds especially true of the Edwardian domestic novel. And it was in the Edwardian period that the English aristocracy, especially as embodied in London Society, flared with a last artificial and decadent brilliance before sinking into its present virtual extinction.

There can be little question as to the importance of Edwardian Society as a literary subject. It is anticipated in Thackeray's *The Newcomes* and Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*. It forms the main subject of a substantial part of the work of Galsworthy and James. H. G. Wells in *Tono-Bungay* and Ford Madox Ford in *The Good Soldier* deal with it. Many of Shaw's plays and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* reflect it. It plays an important part even in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock" and *The Wasteland*.

This dissertation is primarily concerned with represen-

tative Edwardian novelists who take as their subject the British upper class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The value of such a study is twofold: first, as has been indicated, these novelists fill, in many cases, the gaps left by Edwardian historians too intent upon the exclusively democratic tendencies of the time; second, and more important, since my aim is essentially a literary one, the Edwardian aristocracy, or Edwardian Society, as I shall call it, attracted as a subject some of the outstanding novelists of the period. Specifically, I have attempted through a study of Edwardian Society as a social phenomenon and an examination of the more important minor novelists whose subject matter is that phenomenon to gain a better insight into the method and art of John Galsworthy and Henry James, the two major figures insofar as the Edwardian Society novel is concerned.

Such an approach is, of course, essentially historical. Consequently, I have devoted my first chapter to an investigation of the social climate of the Edwardian period, with special emphasis upon the status of the Edwardian aristocracy. Working largely from first-hand sources, I have attempted to catch the spirit of the time — the reaction of an intelligent contemporary to Edwardian Society — rather than make a scientific social analysis of the age.

But the "Society" novel is by no means confined only to the Edwardian period. In the interest of literary and historical perspective, therefore, I have devoted the second chapter to an outline of the evolution of the "Society" novel from the eighteenth century, taking as representative novels Fanny Burney's *Evelina,* Bulwer's *Pelham,* Thackeray's *The Newcomes,* and Trollope's *The Way We Live Now.* In this chapter also I impose a major limitation on my study in defining a "Society" novel as one in which serious treatment is given to a social group which has lost its intrinsic significance, but attains importance through its power to debase the individuals affected by it.

In the third chapter the relevant work of three minor Edwardian Society novelists is analyzed and evaluated: E. F.

Benson, W. B. Maxwell and Howard Sturgis. I have set as chronological limits in my study of the novels of both the minor and major Edwardian Society novelists the period from 1893 to 1910, limits admittedly somewhat arbitrary. The actual years of King Edward VII's reign were from 1901 to 1910, technically, at least, the period designated Edwardian. But there is justification for extending the further limit of the Edwardian period back to 1861, the date of Prince Albert's death, Victoria's virtual retirement, and the consequent emergence of Edward, then Prince of Wales, as the social arbiter of English Society. The near limit could be set as late as 1923, the inaugural date of the first Labor Government. But in my discussion of the Edwardian Society novel I have limited myself to those novels published after E. F. Benson's tremendously popular *Dodo,* which appeared in 1893, and those published before John Galsworthy's *The Patrician,* 1910. It is in this seventeen year period that the most significant and typical Edwardian Society novels appear.

The last two major chapters concern themselves respectively with the Edwardian Society novels of John Galsworthy, *The Island Pharisees, The Man of Property, The Country House, Fraternity* and *The Patrician,* and Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton, What Maisie Knew, The Awkward Age* and *The Wings of the Dove,* these novels being considered within the framework established by the social and literary background material of the previous chapters. In the light thus provided, Galsworthy, with the exception of one novel, *The Man of Property,* shows himself unable to cope with the more subtle and meaningful aspects of the Engilsh upper class as it existed in his own time. James, on the other hand, although his Edwardian Society novels have been considered in the past as principally technical exercises, shows a penetrating insight into a social group that has lost almost all its old intrinsic value.

This historical approach to the novels of Galsworthy and James has, it seems to me, in addition to its novelty two major virtues. In the first place it explains, or offers one explana-

tion, why Galsworthy, after writing one great novel, *The Man of Property,* never achieved that eminence again. In the second place, such an approach reveals that James in his novels concerning the English upper class is not only a virtuoso in technique but also an acute social observer. Too much insistence upon the purely technical aspects of such novels as *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age,* encouraged by James himself in his prefaces, has blinded critics to subtle and fundamental meanings which I believe those novels to contain.

There are also certain subsidiary values in such a project as this in addition to those already mentioned. The novels of the minor Edwardians dealt with here deserve re-evaluation, especially Howard Sturgis' *Belchamber,* which merits a much higher place in the history of the English novel than it has been accorded. And, finally, surely there is a need at this time for systematic investigation and evaluation of the literature of the Edwardian period in England. It is from its small part in that larger project that my own study derives its chief justification.

VITA

Harris Ward Wilson was born at Frederick, Oklahoma, on September 8, 1919, the son of John Benjamin and Anna Maria Wilson. He was graduated from Frederick High School, Frederick, Oklahoma in 1937 and entered the University of Missouri in the fall of that year. He received the B. S. degree in Education in 1941 from the University of Missouri, and in August of that same year was inducted into the United States Army. In March, 1946, he was released from active duty and in June, 1946, entered the University of Chicago, at which he was awarded the A. M. degree in English in June, 1947. From September, 1947, until June, 1949, he held the position of instructor in English at Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Auburn, Alabama, Since September, 1949 he has been an assistant in English at the University of Illinois while completing work for the doctorate.